Mail-order firm responds in unusual way

To my surprise, after arguing in a recent column that it's not such a good idea to buy "returnable" software from mail-order companies, the major company that offers returnable software responded in a rather unexpected fashion — it *agreed* with almost everything I said.

The company — Computer Control Inc. of Pittsburgh — had advertised popular business programs at 25 to 50 percent off the regular list price, and stated the software was returnable within 15 days for a 20 percent restocking charge. Though there are dozens of mail order companies that specialize in discount software for the IBM PC and compatible computers, this one prominently advertises "returnability" in addition to low prices.

Surprising response

Here are some of the main points I made in my article, along with the firm's response:

✔ You need advice. If you're not sure which software is right for your business, the *last place* you should consider buying from is a mail order company.

RESPONSE: "We agree. If you're inexperienced or not sure what you need, it's best to steer clear of mail order companies. Most are not set up to give advice at all. They just take orders. On the other hand, we think we offer very good advice to people who ask our opinions — and many do when about to make an important purchase.

✔ You won't know in 15 days (the allowable return period). It's impossible to determine in such a short period if a complicated program will be adequate for your business needs.

RESPONSE: "We agree here too. Although we always extend the return period to people who ask for more time, it is certainly difficult to know for sure in 15 days if the software is a perfect fit. We make our customers more com-

fortable, however, with the 15-day return period. It merely adds a level of security not available from other sources — and therefore adds more value to the products we sell."

✔ You'll pay too much. As it turns out, if you decide to return the program, the mail order company will refund the difference between the actual amount you paid and 20 percent of the *list* price. For example, the list price of Word Perfect (the popular word processing program) is $495, but the company's discount price is $229. If you return the program, the restocking charge would be 20 percent of $495, or $99 — which is actually 43 percent of the price you paid. That's outrageous!

RESPONSE: "If you check around, you'll find that $229 is about the lowest price available for Word Perfect, regardless of source. So the ability to return the software for a restocking charge is a bonus benefit that you're not actually paying extra for. In fact, fewer than 4 percent of all the products we sold in 1985 were returned to us, which seems to show a high level of satisfaction on the part of our customers. Again, the security provided by the return option is the benefit, even it is rarely used."

✔ It's best to avoid the companies that use the gimmick of "returnable" software for another reason: you'll avoid the possibility of inadvertently buying software that was returned by someone else.

RESPONSE: "Unlike companies that rent software — something we don't do — we never send software to a new customer that's been returned by another. In fact, when a software product comes back it is not "restocked" at all, but instead donated to various schools or universities in our area. We can't speak for other mail-order companies, but that's our practice."

✔ What about the unscrupulous users who take advantage of returnable software to copy the programs. Does the advertising approach of this mail-order firm encourage such behavior?

RESPONSE: "Whenever we sense that someone is dealing with us to copy the program, as evidenced by their questions over the telephone, we try to direct them to companies that are in the business of renting software. Actually, our high restocking fees discourage these people, and our very low rate of returns seems to show that the hackers are avoiding us."

It's what works that counts

What's my response to their response? I was delighted to hear from them. It shows how at least one mail-order company is creating a niche for themselves in the very best way — by providing something extra to their customers. In a business known for fast talkers and poor service, that's refreshing. In this firm's case, their customers seem to value the "returnable" feature, regardless of my arguements.

In answer to my blunt question: "Do you condone people getting advice and demonstrations of software at local computer dealers and then calling your company to buy at a discount?", Judy Yoak, Computer Inventory Control's vice president and chief operating officer replied: "Absolutely not. I think that's grossly unfair and inappropriate. Our best customers are knowledgeable buyers who know exactly what they want, mainly from their own experience or from reading reviews by unbiased reviewers like you."

Now, how could I disagree with that?

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